

Church workers caught in Haiti's devastation: Dire conditions

by [John Dart](#) in the [February 9, 2010](#) issue

Nearly a week after the devastating earthquake, with the capital city suffering from a shortage of water, food, medical help, gasoline, housing and safety from looters, Haiti's Episcopal bishop Jean Zache Duracin rejected an offer to evacuate him from Port-au-Prince. "No, I will stay with my people. We need to help them," Duracin told U.S.-based missionaries monitoring reports after a 7.0 magnitude earthquake hit January 12. Death toll estimates ranged upwards of 50,000.

Holy Trinity Cathedral, the Episcopal cathedral, was among the structures that crumbled in the densely populated city, forcing the bishop to live in a tent city along with 3,000 other homeless victims, said the Episcopal News Service.

The Diocese of Haiti, one of a dozen overseas Episcopal Church dioceses, is numerically the largest in the denomination with more than 83,000 Episcopalians in 169 congregations served by only 37 clergy. Up to 100 churches were thought to be damaged.

U.S. churches responded rapidly with donations through church relief agencies and other charities. Conditions were dire in the first week because so many medical facilities were damaged.

Officials of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) confirmed by January 15 that Holy Cross Hospital in Leogane—a ministry that the PCUSA shared with the Episcopal Diocese of Haiti—was destroyed.

United Methodist officials in the U.S. were stunned when on January 16 and 18 they received confirmation that Sam Dixon, the leader of the United Methodist Committee on Relief, and Clifton Rabb, head of mission volunteers, died from injuries sustained when they were buried in the rubble of a hotel. UMCOR consultant James Gulley, who was rescued, reported that both men said they thought their legs were broken.

The three men were at the Montana Hotel meeting with members of the independent Methodist Church of Haiti to discuss ways to help the nation.

“I have no idea why I was given the gift of life and Sam and Clint were not,” Gulley told United Methodist News Service. “I can’t answer that any better than Job could answer why some people suffer more than others.”

Dixon’s travels for UMCOR included tours of Indonesia, Africa and tornado-damaged towns in the U.S. “He lived his life following the commandments of Jesus to feed the hungry, care for the sick, and love the least of these,” said Houston bishop Janice Riggle Huie, UMCOR president.

Volunteer missions to Haiti, sent by U.S. church bodies for short periods—such as Presbyterian groups from New Jersey, Virginia and Georgia—escaped tragic results in many cases, though two U.S. volunteers from other groups died from injuries.

Jean Arnwine, from Highland Park United Methodist Church in Texas, which has sent medical mission trips to Haiti since 1976, was one of 11 volunteers providing eye care. Pulled from the wreckage, she later died of injuries in Guadeloupe.

Benjamin J. Larson, a student at Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa, and the son of Evangelical Lutheran Church in America pastors in Duluth, Minnesota, was found dead under a destroyed building that his wife and a cousin were able to escape.

Baptists mourned the death of Bienne L’Amerique, 46, pastor of Eglise Baptiste du Shiloh (Shiloh Baptist Church) in Port-au-Prince. A Baptist leader in his nation, he played host to mission groups and was due for a U.S. visit in February, a Baptist official said.

On January 17, presiding bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori of the Episcopal Church spoke to a congregation in New Jersey and at Washington’s National Cathedral, taking questions before both gatherings. At St. Andrew & Holy Communion in South Orange, Jefferts Schori said eight-year-old Ismail Taylor-Kamara asked the most important question—“Will you help me?”—when earlier he had asked his priest, Sandye Wilson, if she would organize parish youngsters to help Haitian children.

At the evening prayer service for Haiti in the National Cathedral, where Raymond Joseph, Haitian ambassador to the U.S., expressed his thanks to Americans, Jefferts

Schori opened by saying that the religious question of “why” cannot be answered fully.

“The reality is that life is not safe or predictable, but what we do with our lives gives them meaning,” she said. “God does not cause suffering or punish people with it, but God is present and known more intimately in the midst of suffering. Above all, we become more human through our broken hearts.”